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KT photo | **Tim Bath**

House of Burgess: Candidates finally square off

Trump, Clinton hold 1st presidential debate Sept. 26

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

Believe it or not, we're in the home stretch, people. It seems this accursed election cycle might yet end. There are just 34 days left until Nov. 8, Election Day.

Tuesday saw the one and only vice presidential debate between Democrat Tim Kaine and Republican Mike Pence, moderated by CBS News' Elaine Quijano at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. Sunday will see the

second (this time, town hall-style) presidential debate between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump, moderated by CBS' Martha Raddatz and CNN's Anderson Cooper at Washington University in St. Louis. The final presidential debate is set for Oct. 19 and will be moderated by Fox News' Chris Wallace at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

But the Sept. 26 debate was the first-ever showdown between Clinton and Trump, held at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. More than 80 million tuned in, the most watched debate ever.

NBC News' Lester Holt served as moderator and began with an admonishment to the audience to be quiet, which was nonetheless broken several times.

"The audience here in the room has agreed to remain silent so that we can focus on what the candidates are saying," he said.

(If those in attendance weren't supposed to say anything, why were they there? Just hold it in an empty room, then.)

Despite his constant water gulping and sniffing, Trump came out of the gate strong. He hit Clinton forcefully on several vulnerable points, including President Bill Clinton's signing of NAFTA, her ever-shifting position on the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the email scandal.

About halfway through, though, the wheels began to come off.

“I have a feeling that by the end of this evening, I’m going to be blamed for everything that’s ever happened,” Clinton said.

“Why not?” Trump responded.

“Why not? Yeah, why not?” Clinton said to laughter.

This moment represented a turn. While Trump had charged directly at her full force, Clinton stepped to the side and let him defeat himself with his own bluster.

“He didn’t pay any federal income tax,” Clinton said.

“Makes me smart,” Trump responded, basically confirming one of the many suspicions about his yet-to-be-released full tax returns.

Clinton then brought up Trump’s habit of not paying his bills, either. Trump managed to walk straight into this one, as well.

“Maybe he didn’t do a good job and I was unsatisfied with his work, which our country should do, too,” Trump said of Andrew Tesoro, an architect in attendance who had been stiffed after working on the Trump National Golf Club Westchester in Briarcliff Manor, New York.

Near the end, Trump completely lost the plot when the issue of disposition was brought up.

“The other day, I saw Donald saying that there were some Iranian sailors on a ship in the waters off of Iran, and they were taunting American sailors who were on a nearby ship. He said, ‘You know, if they taunted our sailors, I’d blow them out of the water and start another war.’ That’s not good judgment,” Clinton said.

“That would not start a war,” Trump responded. (Yeah, actually, it might.)

Clinton proved the temperament case by causing Trump to completely lose his head over alleged racist, sexist comments about Alicia Machado, a Miss Universe winner 20 years prior.

“You know, Hillary is hitting me with tremendous commercials. Some of it’s said in entertainment. Some of it’s said — somebody who’s been very vicious to me, Rosie O’Donnell, I said very tough things to her, and I think everybody would agree that she deserves it and nobody feels sorry for her,” Trump sputtered, apropos of nothing.

Game, set, match.

Winner: Clinton.

Loser: Trump.

Highlight: “We’re just opening up on Pennsylvania Avenue right next to the White House, so if I don’t get there one way, I’m going to get to Pennsylvania Avenue another,” said Trump.

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